



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1111/1468-2281.12216](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12216)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Benbow, T. (2018). The Royal Navy and Sea Power in British Strategy, 1945-55. *HISTORICAL RESEARCH*, 91(252), 375-398. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12216>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## The Royal Navy and Sea Power in British Strategy, 1945-55

Tim Benbow

It might be thought that the importance of sea power and the Royal Navy in British strategy would be a given.<sup>1</sup> As an island power that has long played a notable role in international affairs on its neighbouring continent and also further overseas, any consideration of how Britain uses military means to support its policy goals in peacetime and in war (the definition of strategy used herein) must surely start from the premise that use of the sea is essential and that naval power is therefore a central pillar. Clearly, the precise role and priority accorded to the Navy fluctuates according to the context of the time: the acceptance of a continental commitment before the First World War and the focus on strategic bombing in the 1930s, for example, both saw the Navy take second place to other concerns. Even during the intense debates of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the need for Britain to have a powerful fleet equivalent to if not greater than the other leading navies, was hardly disputed. Even second place still acknowledged that sea power was of vital importance to Britain, albeit not enjoying the preeminent position it had held in previous centuries. The continuing centrality of naval power should have been all the more evident in the aftermath of the Second World War, in which it was one of the principal pillars of British and indeed Allied strategy.<sup>2</sup>

Yet during the period immediately following the end of the war, the place of sea power in British strategy was seriously questioned and the very survival of the Royal Navy as a significant actor came under sustained attack. In contrast to the usual pattern of bureaucratic compromise and broadly balanced forces, the ten years after the war saw a growing assault on the role of the Navy and its core capabilities. General scepticism about the likelihood of major war or the existence of a naval threat from the Soviet Union, together with comfortable assumptions about the naval power of the United States, created some initial doubts about the importance of the Navy for Britain at a time of severe economic strain. These sentiments coalesced with wild theories about the impact of nuclear weapons and resurrected claims regarding the potential of land-based air power. Supported by powerful institutional interests that sought to prioritise air power or simply to save money, these attacks culminated in a campaign that amounted to an existential threat to the role of the Royal Navy in British strategy. Yet in the face of this coordinated onslaught, the Admiralty held its course, setting out the continuing need to defend sea communications and making the case for naval aviation, which was the principal target of its critics. It advanced a case that was sufficiently convincing to win over enough of the key decision-makers, and to outlast some of the irreconcilables, such that the Navy successfully weathered the storm. The 'decline' theme is a little tired and lacking in nuance as a description of the postwar fate of the Royal Navy. As this paper argues, however, had the debates of the early 1950s taken a

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Christopher Bell, James Goldrick, Edward Hampshire, John Hattendorf, Greg Kennedy, George Peden and Geoffrey Till for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> One recent work suggests that naval power (alongside air power) was even more significant than is generally conceded; O'Brien, P.P., *How the War was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

different turn, the chapter title used in one declinist work, 'The end of the road: British sea power in the postwar world', might have been amply justified.<sup>3</sup>

This paper considers the evolving role of the Royal Navy in Britain's strategy during the ten years following the end of the Second World War. The general literature on British defence policy since 1945 tends to devote little attention to naval matters, in particular to those in the early 1950s despite these providing a number of the principal controversies of the period. Where they do touch specifically on naval issues, these tend to be the inter-service disputes of the mid-1960s or even the early 1980s, overlooking their context in the form of the earlier arguments that were equally bitter and perhaps of even higher stakes for the Navy.<sup>4</sup> Among works specifically on the Royal Navy, its development in the 1950s has not received the attention it deserves. This is perhaps in part because much of the literature either does not make use of archival sources or appeared at a time when many of the relevant papers (especially those relating to nuclear strategy) were initially withheld and not released to the National Archives under the 30-year rule.<sup>5</sup> While several of these works provide valuable context,<sup>6</sup> the result is that the magnitude and the gravity of the challenges to the Navy and the aircraft carriers that were its core capability have not been fully appreciated. This paper therefore adds to the existing literature by examining a subject that has not previously been covered in depth, drawing on some previously unused archival sources.

---

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, P., *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* – Third Edition (London: Fontana, 1991), chapter 12.

<sup>4</sup> For general works on British defence policy, see Bartlett, C.J., *The Long Retreat: A Short History of British Defence Policy 1945-70* (London: Macmillan, 1972); Baylis, J., *British Defence Policy in a Changing World* (London: Croom Helm, 1977); Carver, M., *Tightrope Walking: British Defence Policy Since 1945* (London: Hutchinson, 1992); Croft, S. et al., *Britain and Defence 1945-2000 – A Policy Re-evaluation* (Harlow: Longman, 2000); Darby, P., *British Defence Policy East of Suez 1947-68* (London: OUP, 1973); Dockrill, M., *British Defence Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Gregory, F. et al. (eds.) *Perspectives upon British Defence Policy, 1945-1970* (Southampton: University of Southampton, 1978); Martin, L.W., *British Defence Policy: the Long Recession* (London: IISS, 1969); Ovendale, R., *British Defence Policy Since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Peden, G.C., *Arms, Economics and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007); Rosecrance, R.N., *Defense of the Realm: British Strategy in the Nuclear Epoch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Self, R., *British Foreign and Defence Policy Since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Snyder, W.P., *The Politics of British Defense Policy 1945-62* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> The best overview of the Royal Navy in the postwar period is Grove, E.J., *Vanguard to Trident: British Naval Policy Since World War II* (London: Bodley Head, 1987), although it was written before several key sources were released. Other works draw on little or no archival material; see Arthur, M., *The Navy: 1939 to the Present Day* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997); Crowe, W. J., *The Policy Roots of the Modern Royal Navy, 1946-63* (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1965); Garbutt, P.E., *Naval Challenge 1945-1961* (London: MacDonald, 1961); Hampshire, A.C., *The Royal Navy Since 1945* (London: Purnell, 1975); Humble, R., *The Rise and Fall of the British Navy* (London: Queen Anne Press, 1986); Redford, D. and Grove, P. *The Royal Navy: A History Since 1900* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Tute, W., *The True Glory: The Story of the Royal Navy over a Thousand Years* (London: MacDonald, 1983); Wettern, D., *The Decline of British Sea Power* (London: Janes, 1982); Van Der Vat, D., *Standard of Power: The Royal Navy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Particularly Grove, *Vanguard to Trident*; also Moore, R., *The Royal Navy and Nuclear Weapons* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), Baylis, J., *Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Strategy 1945-1964* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

## Early developments, 1945-1947

The context for post-war British strategy was distinctly challenging.<sup>7</sup> There were the usual problems of a transition from major war to peace, primarily demobilisation of both the armed forces and the wartime economy. However, in contrast to the aftermath of earlier great power wars, such as in 1918 or 1815, there was no period of even relative peace and stability in which to recuperate. Over the final months of the war London had come to view its Soviet ally with increasing suspicion and lingering hopes of postwar partnership swiftly gave way to the onset of cold war. The victory of the Labour Party in the May 1945 election brought to power a government that was determined to increase the proportion of national wealth devoted to social services and health. Yet there was no intention to undertake any radical change in direction as regards foreign policy, with Britain's remaining global commitments to be upheld. This aspiration was seriously complicated by the huge recent advances in military technology, which needed to be assessed and developed if the armed forces were to remain at the front rank of military power. This would not come cheaply but the country's serious and worsening economic problems meant that defence spending was bound to come under severe pressure. The longer term result of these factors was a continuous crisis in defence policy, with demands to reduce defence spending never quite being matched by reductions in the calls on the armed forces.

Despite the dizzying pace of recent technological development, the Admiralty anticipated that the postwar roles of the Navy would remain broadly familiar. In peacetime, they were, first, to 'keep the peace and support British policy', and second, to ensure readiness for war and the strength to deter any aggressor. In war, the Navy would have to destroy enemy sea and air forces, defend imperial sea communications, attack enemy sea communications and cooperate with the other services in amphibious operations. The fleet should therefore include 'Fighting units to counter the enemy's heavy surface forces', including 'a proper proportion' of battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers; escort squadrons to protect shipping; shore-based aircraft; minesweeping forces; fast submarines, minelayers and coastal craft to attack enemy shipping; forces for amphibious operations; bases, shore organisation and afloat support. All of these elements were needed: 'None has yet been rendered obsolete by scientific development, though their characteristics and relative numbers will undoubtedly change as new weapons and tactics are evolved.'<sup>8</sup>

The impact of nuclear weapons on the Navy was intensively studied within the Admiralty, with a wide range of tentative conclusions being drawn.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, the future could be stark, with the possibility that attacks on ports rather than shipping could end the Navy's role of protecting sea communications, or that attacks on industry and civilians might decide the war before the Navy could mobilise. In the event of nuclear war, it was

---

<sup>7</sup> For the foreign policy context, see Barnett, C., *Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities, 1945-1950* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Bullock, A., *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary, 1945-1951* (London: Heinemann, 1983); Reynolds, D., *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Longman, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Admiralty Plans Division, 'The Post War Navy and the Policy Governing its Composition', 17 July 1945, The National Archives, Kew: ADM167/123. All primary sources are from the National Archives unless stated.

<sup>9</sup> For a useful overview, see Moore, *Royal Navy and Nuclear Weapons*, pp.39-59.

likely that, 'no fleet of surface ships could remain afloat within the sphere of action of land-based aircraft carrying atomic bombs'. Alternatively, the growing vulnerability of aircraft to air defences could hand the Navy the task of delivering nuclear weapons, 'by rockets launched from specialised vessels, either surface or, even better, submersible'. Moreover, general war was not the only possibility, as the threat of retaliation could deter the use of nuclear weapons just as it had with poison gas; there would still be conflicts between lesser powers in which Britain could be involved or threats to British territory, 'in which a more or less normal Navy would play its usual part'.<sup>10</sup> Hence, although the impact of nuclear weapons remained uncertain, potential roles remained for the Navy in limited wars, in delivering nuclear weapons or even in conventional operations during a nuclear war. The assumption that sea power retained a key role even in nuclear war was not confined to the Admiralty: a 1946 committee chaired by Sir Henry Tizard (the government's chief scientific advisor) examined these questions, concluding that whilst atomic weapons would have a decisive role, the significance of the war at sea was in no way diminished: 'The defence of sea communications, and the strength of the Royal Navy, reinforced, but not replaced by aircraft will remain the supreme necessity.'<sup>11</sup>

The principal obstacle confronting the Admiralty in this early period was not a general rejection of the role of sea power in future war but rather a widely held view that, despite the increasing hostility of the USSR, it posed little naval threat. Scepticism on this front went right to the top with Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister, questioning why Admiralty plans envisaged 182,000 men whereas in 1938, when it had faced the German, Italian and Japanese fleets, the Navy had 119,000.<sup>12</sup> This feeling was, unsurprisingly, shared in the Treasury, where one senior official questioned whether the Defence Committee would approve the Admiralty's plans for the Fleet Air Arm, 'in face of the fact that we have no naval aggressor to consider'.<sup>13</sup> In response, the Admiralty argued that a significant Soviet threat could not be ruled out, not least due to vessels captured from Germany, while A.V. Alexander, the First Lord of the Admiralty (subsequently, from December 1946, Minister of Defence),<sup>14</sup> told the Cabinet that 'it was clear that the Soviet Government were seeking to build up a powerful Navy'. It also pointed out that the pre-war British fleet to which the Prime Minister referred had been gravely inadequate for the threats it faced – not least because defending sea communications required far more resources than attacking them. Further, it argued that the strength of the Navy depended on its assigned tasks rather than relating only to the strength of the most likely enemy, and pointed to the wider utility of the Navy as the most mobile British force available as a deterrent or a 'steadying influence' anywhere in the world.<sup>15</sup> The evident growth of Soviet naval capability soon spiked the guns

---

<sup>10</sup> See papers in ADM1/17259, especially memoranda by ACNS(W), 15 August 1945; DNOR, 4 September 1945; and DTSD, 11 October 1945.

<sup>11</sup> DO(46)89, 'Future Developments in Weapons and Methods of War', 8 July 1946, CAB131/3.

<sup>12</sup> Minute M195/46, 4 June 1946, Annex I, DO(46)97, CAB131/3.

<sup>13</sup> Blunt to Sir Bernard Gilbert, 11 July 1946, T225/1101.

<sup>14</sup> Howell, D., 'Alexander, Albert Victor, Earl Alexander of Hillsborough (1885–1965)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) – hereafter *DNB*.

<sup>15</sup> Prime Minister, CP(46)65, 'Defence Policy in 1946', 15 February 1946, CAB129/7; DO(46)5<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, 15 February 1946, CAB131/1; CM(46)16<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, 18 February 1946, CAB128/5; First Lord to Prime

of the sceptics. When Hugh Dalton (Chancellor of the Exchequer) again noted that the German, Italian and Japanese fleets no longer existed and 'no one claims that the Russians have, as yet, a fleet as strong as any one of these in 1938', he was corrected by Admiral Sir John Cunningham, the First Sea Lord, who informed him that whilst Germany had had 65 submarines on the outbreak of war, the Russians currently had 230 in service, alongside 17 cruisers and 69 destroyers, many of which were new.<sup>16</sup>

While the growing threat at sea was becoming harder to ignore, the actual strength of the Navy could only be determined in the context of the needs of the other services – and within the limits of the overall defence budget. The key question here was the likely pattern of a future war. The broad expectation in 1946 and 1947 was that in the event of war there would be no way to prevent the USSR, with its enormous superiority in land forces, from rapidly overrunning Western Europe. British strategy would therefore rest on withdrawing from Europe and relying for victory on atomic air attacks on the Soviet Union. Therein lay a serious dilemma for Britain: Soviet military superiority meant that the West would have to use nuclear weapons since conventional air power alone would be inadequate. Yet their use would bring down nuclear retaliation on the UK. With its 'dense and concentrated population and industries', even a small number of nuclear weapons could inflict such great damage 'that the area might become useless as an offensive air base and the country might never recover'.<sup>17</sup> Britain could not win without nuclear weapons yet nor could she survive a war in which they were used. The result was a growing emphasis on deterring rather than fighting war. However, the hope in some quarters that this could lead to a cheap defence policy were swiftly dashed as it became clear that nuclear weapons would not be sufficient on their own. Britain would need to defend air bases for the counter-offensive in the UK and the Middle East and would therefore need conventional forces to defend both, as well as the sea communications connecting them.<sup>18</sup>

This strategy envisaged a significant role for naval forces, which would be needed to control communications in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean for access to sources of supply, supporting the deployment of air forces, and denying use of the sea to the enemy.<sup>19</sup> This was no minor task: 'by 1956 the threat to sea communications would also be greater than in the Second World War'. The principal threats at sea would be fast submarines,

---

Minister, DO(46)97, 24 July 1946, CAB131/3. A later paper added that the pre-war figure did not include naval aviation, which was then provided by the RAF, accounting for 55,000 additional personnel.

<sup>16</sup> DO(47)9, Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'Defence Estimates for 1947-48', 13 January 1947, CAB131/4; DO(47)2<sup>nd</sup> Conclusions, 14 January 1947, CAB131/5. By September 1950, according to the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Soviet Navy had in service 17 cruisers, 133 destroyers, 181 ocean-going submarines and 130 coastal submarines; their naval air force alone had 2,980 aircraft. DO(50)101, 'Military and Economic Strength of the Soviet Union, JIC(50)83(Final)', 18 September 1950, CAB131/9. These figures cast doubt on comments such as that by Jackson and Bramall that in 1950, 'there was no evidence of the Soviet naval expansion which was to start in earnest in the 1960s'; they later accept that by 1953 that the growth of the Soviet fleet helped to make the case for the Navy. Jackson, W. and Bramall, D., *The Chiefs: The Story of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff* (London: Brassey's, 1992), pp.279, 287.

<sup>17</sup> JP(47)55(Final), 'Future Defence Policy', 7 May 1947, DEFE6/2; JP(48)59(Final), 'Overall Strategic Concept for War in 1957', 16 September 1948, DEFE4/16.

<sup>18</sup> DO(47)44, Chiefs of Staff, 'Future Defence Policy', 22 May 1947, CAB131/4; also JP(47)129 (Final), 'Shape and Size of the Armed Forces', 11 November 1947, DEFE6/3.

<sup>19</sup> DO(48)61, Report by Chiefs of Staff, 'Defence Review', 14 September 1948, CAB131/6.

aircraft and mines, but ‘the threat of surface attacks on our shipping must still be guarded against’, while to ensure the defence of the Middle East and India, ‘Naval forces capable of giving all necessary support to the Army’s land battle will be required’.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the deterrent to war would comprise not only nuclear weapons but also conventional forces to defend the ‘three pillars’ – the UK, sea communications and the Middle East. Nuclear air power would not provide a low-cost means to cut through the Gordian Knot facing British defence policy-makers.

Yet the forces required by this strategy were well beyond what was feasible. When the Minister of Defence explicitly asked the Admiralty in July 1947 what forces would be required on the outbreak of war, the response listed eight battleships, ten fleet carriers, 21 light fleet carriers and 30 cruisers as well as numerous escorts and submarines.<sup>21</sup> This theoretical force structure, just like those of the other two services, was quite outside the realms of plausibility. The government therefore imposed a series of political assumptions to serve as the basis for planning. The most significant of these was that ‘the probability of war in the next five years is negligible’; the Minister of Defence specified a budget ceiling of £600m and asked the Chiefs of Staff what could be afforded under it and what risks would be involved.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps predictably, the resulting papers from the service departments entailed defence spending of £900m. The Minister bluntly informed the Chiefs that ‘it is not possible to contemplate a major war until our economic and industrial strength has recovered’, so the £600m limit must be accepted. He reiterated the political assumptions that the government was imposing: it ‘must be accepted that the risk of a major war is ruled out during the next five years, and that the risk will increase only gradually during the following five years... If attacked, we must fight with what we have’. Since the country could not afford all the forces seen as necessary on the outbreak of war, it would have to ‘build up only the forces which give us the best chance of survival’, which, of course, left ample room for interpretation and argument. The priority should be ‘forces which in peace give the best visible show of strength and therefore have the greatest deterrent value’ as well as research and development for the future.<sup>23</sup>

For the Navy, this implied the postponement of new construction in favour of modernizing the existing fleet. Delaying new warships offered short-term attractions in terms of balancing the budget but had the significant downside of storing up problems for the future. Promised warships and equipment programmes were delayed and when the ‘jam tomorrow’ became due, there were always other pressures and priorities. The Navy was (and has often proved to be) particularly vulnerable to seeing its force structure eroded as a result of short-term financial pressures, not least due to the high capital cost of major units making

---

<sup>20</sup> DO(47)44.

<sup>21</sup> Board Minute 4171, ADM167/128; Memorandum B520, ‘Future Defence Policy – Naval Peacetime Requirements’, 26 July 1947, ADM167/129.

<sup>22</sup> COS(47)114(O), Minister of Defence, ‘Future Defence Policy’, 30 May 1947, DEFES/4.

<sup>23</sup> COS(47)173(O), Minister of Defence, ‘Future Defence Policy – Strength of the Armed Forces’, 23 August 1947, DEFES/5.

them an easy target to produce quick savings. This was only one of the problems emanating from what amounted to a new version of the infamous 'ten-year rule' of the interwar period.<sup>24</sup>

In 1947, the forces envisaged were broadly feasible, even if not wholly meeting the requirements of the services and at a cost higher than Dalton, the Chancellor, wished.<sup>25</sup> The Navy would need 'strong and up-to-date anti-submarine forces', with 'the backing of surface forces, including shipborne aircraft', and the RAF would need fighters as well as bombers. A large regular Army, however, would be 'neither necessary nor within our means to sustain', so there should be a small, well-equipped, highly trained regular Army, backed by a reserve force.<sup>26</sup> Alexander concluded that the accepted priorities meant that the forces could not be treated equally: 'Put crudely, my view is that proportionately most of our eggs must go into the baskets of research and development, the Air Force (especially on the deterrent side) and the Navy (primarily on Naval Aviation and protection of communications)'.

What kept the force structure within the realms of plausibility was, first, the assumption that war could be ruled out for five to ten years and, second, the fact that the adopted strategy did not require a large army. Should either of these two assumptions be challenged, the problems for British defence policy would intensify. In fact, both were soon overtaken by events.

### **The problem compounded**

The first additional strain was a reassessment of the size of the army that Britain needed. In early 1948, Field Marshal Montgomery, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, floated the idea that the defence of the UK required any Russian attack to be held as far east as possible, preferably on the Rhine, and stressed that Britain would need to commit substantial land forces. Doing so would provide some defence in depth against Soviet air and missile attack on the UK, which could otherwise defeat it even without the use of atomic weapons.<sup>27</sup> Lord Tedder, Chief of the Air Staff, drew attention to the financial implications of the proposal and warned: 'If a Continental policy was now to be adopted, the future shape and size of the armed forces would need to be recast.' Admiral Sir John Cunningham, First Sea Lord, pointed out that traditional British policy was to refrain from land operations at the outset of a war and use maritime power, to which air power had now been added; undertaking land

---

<sup>24</sup> The postwar 'five plus five' version did lack the most damaging feature of the interwar ten-year rule, that it rolled forward each year; at least the new period was fixed to 1957. Jackson and Bramall, *The Chiefs*, p.271; Grove, E.J., 'The Post War "Ten Year Rule" – Myth and Reality', *RUSI Journal*, Vol.129 No.4 (December 1984). Nevertheless, it still had harmful effects. The secretary of the Chiefs of Staff Committee suggested that this relaxed view of the potential Soviet threat impeded strategy making: 'until recently any planning on a long term basis was handicapped by the general conception that war (from 1947) was unlikely during the next five years. Even reference in highly secret official papers to a potential enemy was frowned upon.' Note by General Hollis, 'Shape and Size of the Armed Forces', 8 October 1948, CAB21/1862.

<sup>25</sup> Dalton wanted greater reductions in military spending and was frustrated that the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Minister of Defence all opposed this; Dalton, H., *High Tide and After, Memoirs 1945-1960* (London: Frederick Muller, 1962), pp.193-202; Pimlott, B. (ed.), *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1918-40, 1945-60* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), pp.405-07, 414-15; Dell, E., *The Chancellors: A History of the Chancellors of the Exchequer 1945-1990* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp.68-70.

<sup>26</sup> COS(47)33(O), Minister of Defence, 18 February 1947, DEF5/3.

<sup>27</sup> COS(48)26(O), Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 'The Problem of Future War and the Strategy of War with Russia', 30 January 1948, DEF5/10.



operations would reduce British sea and air power. Montgomery in turn insisted that it would be disastrous to allow the USSR to overrun Western Europe, whereas defending the Rhine would facilitate both the air defence of the UK and the defence of sea communications.<sup>28</sup> While there was undeniable military logic to his argument, such a new commitment would increase the already grave strain on the budget; put simply, 'we shall certainly not be able to afford a deterrent air force, an adequate navy and a continental army.'<sup>29</sup> The government was not ready to accept Montgomery's costly proposal but developments in world politics soon precipitated a rethink.

The international situation deteriorated so sharply during 1948 that Attlee warned it might become necessary to reconsider the assumption that the risk of war would be low before 1952, then rising gradually until 1957.<sup>30</sup> The coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin blockade fostered the impression that there could be a war 'in the near future', and the British forces were unprepared and needed urgent remedial measures.<sup>31</sup> The same year saw the beginning of the Malayan Emergency, which became a long and heavy military commitment. Growing international tension resulted in Britain taking a prominent role in the Brussels Pact, leading to the Western European Union (March 1948) and then NATO (April 1949).<sup>32</sup> Whilst the creation of these alliances represented a triumph for British diplomacy, they entailed expensive new pledges to maintain land and air forces in West Germany. British responsibilities in a war with Russia were described, in order of priority, as: defence of the UK; control of essential sea communications in the Atlantic and Mediterranean; defence of the Middle East base; preparation of bases for US Strategic Air Forces; and fighting on the continent of Europe.<sup>33</sup> The last had not even been mentioned in January 1947.

The principal challenge for defence policy was to devise a force structure that could achieve the ambitious aims set by the government, within a budget that was affordable for an economy in a state of perpetual crisis. A series of attempts to square this circle made only limited progress. In 1949 the government established an 'Inter-Service Working Party on the Shape and Size of the Armed Forces', referred to as the Harwood Committee after the civil servant who chaired it.<sup>34</sup> It based its study on fairly benign assumptions, not only the still extant view that there would be no war for five years and then only a rising risk thereafter, but also that there would be no less than 18 months warning before any war, and that it would see significant American forces engaged from the outset (a case of third time lucky?). The

---

<sup>28</sup> COS(48)16<sup>th</sup>, 2 February 1948 and COS(48)18<sup>th</sup>, 4 February 1948, DEFE4/10; see also Ovendale, *British Defence Policy*, pp.46-48; Baylis, J., *British Defence Policy: Striking the Right Balance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp.20-23. Jackson and Bramall comment, 'At no period before or since has there been such bitterness and animosity in the Chiefs of Staff Committee.' *The Chiefs*, pp.271-73.

<sup>29</sup> PUS to Secretary of State for Air, 27 January 1948, AIR8/1587; emphasis original.

<sup>30</sup> CP(48)206, Prime Minister, 'Preparations for Defence', 24 August 1948, CAB129/29.

<sup>31</sup> DO(48)49, Chiefs of Staff, 'Preparations for Defence', 29 July 1948, CAB131/6. See also CP(48)7, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 'Review of Soviet Policy', 6 January 1948, CAB129/23.

<sup>32</sup> For analysis of these and copies of the treaties, see Baylis, J., *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> DO(48)53, 'Preparations for Defence', 11 August 1948, CAB131/6. Britain formally committed troops to the continent in 1950, though it was not announced until 1954.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Harwood, drafted in from the Ministry of Food, was undoubtedly neutral but his expertise in defence was uncertain; Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy*, p.248.

report sought the best force structure that could be devised within the Treasury-imposed budget ceiling for the next three years. The result, focusing on a war after 1957, was swingeing cuts in the armed forces.<sup>35</sup> Regarding the Navy, while the Harwood report did stress the need to defend sea communications, it made heroic assumptions about the extent to which Britain could rely on the Americans to take on roles previously seen as core to the Royal Navy. Those to 'be performed by allied naval forces or not at all' included countering enemy surface warships, protecting convoys through the Mediterranean, and defending the Persian Gulf and the Far East (except Hong Kong). The report envisaged removing all battleships, cutting carriers, halving the number of cruisers and even abolishing the Royal Marines; a role remained for naval aviation but it would be increasingly integrated into the RAF.<sup>36</sup> The main strength of the fleet would be a carrier task force, which would be largely confined to eastern Atlantic and UK waters, together with some escorts in the Mediterranean. The result would be a carrier and small ship Navy, 'whose main wartime task would be the protection of the United Kingdom and of its approaches and sea communications with North America against submarine attack'.<sup>37</sup> The Air Ministry embraced the suggestion that Britain did not need large warships: 'The Navy is subjected to the most vigorous cuts of all. This is based on the thesis, which we consider the right one, that America holds such a preponderance at sea that our contribution can be reduced to very little in the class of heavy ships, and that the Russian effort at sea will be almost exclusively devoted to submarine warfare.'<sup>38</sup> Their comments overlooked the fact that the report contained a similar judgement about the limited need for heavy bombers given the US preponderance in this category.<sup>39</sup>

The report satisfied no one. The Treasury was concerned that it assumed significant increases in expenditure after the initial three-year period. The Chiefs of Staff agreed that the conclusions were quite unacceptable – not only would the recommended forces be unable to fulfil agreed policy, they would also cost more than the stated ceiling – and treated the report as proof that the envisaged budget could not sustain government policy.<sup>40</sup> Alexander stated starkly: 'It is not difficult to see that the Harwood proposals as they stand would lead to such a catastrophic decline in our influence as would bring very close our extinction as a first rank Power.'<sup>41</sup> Many of the suggested cuts would eventually come to pass over the following decades, with the vision of the future Navy proving remarkably prophetic, but they represented too bitter a pill for the government to swallow at this point. While the Treasury was keen to squeeze defence in order to avoid having to reduce spending on social services,

---

<sup>35</sup> DO(49)47, 'Size and Shape of the Armed Forces: Report of the Harwood Working Party', 21 June 1949, CAB131/7. Papers relating to the report can be found in DEFE7/592 and 593.

<sup>36</sup> DO(49)47, also 'Appendix A to Annex VIII – Shape and Size of Navy in 1956-57'.

<sup>37</sup> DO(49)48, 'The Size and Shape of the Armed Forces: The Harwood Report', 21 June 1949, CAB131/7.

<sup>38</sup> 'Notes on Harwood Report', undated (April 1949), AIR20/11422.

<sup>39</sup> This point did not escape the notice of the Treasury, which described the Air Ministry's planned bomber force as excessive and 'not consistent with the main strategy under which the responsibility for such air power is left to the USA'; 'Size and Shape of the Armed Forces 1950-53: Specific items on which further savings might be made', 19 November 1949, T225/62.

<sup>40</sup> For the Treasury opinion, see comments of 4 July 1949, T225/62; for the Chiefs' view, COS(49)77<sup>th</sup>, 25 May 1949, DEFE4/22.

<sup>41</sup> DO(49)51, Minister of Defence, 'Size and Shape of the Armed Forces 1950-53', 27 June 1949, CAB131/7.

the Ministry of Defence received support from the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Affairs Office in moderating the demands of the Chancellor.<sup>42</sup>

In September 1949 the Chiefs of Staff set the strategic priorities as first, success in the cold war; second, the defence of Britain against air attack; third, the security of sea communications; fourth, the retention of the Middle East; fifth, the provision of forces for Western Europe; and sixth, the build-up for an ultimate offensive. Reliance on allies had led to a major scaling back in the aspirations of the Royal Navy. Admiralty proposals assumed that allies would provide half of the forces required in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and all of the forces for the South Atlantic, the Pacific and the Western Indian Ocean; Commonwealth countries would take on South East Asia and the Eastern Indian Ocean. This represented a massive reduction in the global presence of the Royal Navy but demonstrated a degree of realism about the need to concentrate its efforts at home. The three pillars of strategy remained defending the UK, sea communications and the Middle East; the land commitment would be two divisions each to the Middle East and Western Europe.<sup>43</sup>

The new continental commitment remained the subject of much debate. Late in 1949 Montgomery's successor as Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir William Slim suggested that holding Western Europe should be elevated over defending the Middle East. The other service chiefs remained sceptical. Tedder believed it would be disastrous for Britain to add major land forces in Europe to its defence commitments, while Vice-Admiral Sir George Creasy (standing in for Fraser, the First Sea Lord) argued that the two British divisions to be committed could hold the Middle East but would make little difference in Europe. Nevertheless, the Committee decided to produce a new study of defence policy.<sup>44</sup> This became 'Defence Policy and Global Strategy', the British equivalent of the American NSC-68 paper that fundamentally recast US strategy for the cold war.<sup>45</sup>

As with many of the key postwar defence reviews, the 1950 Global Strategy paper drew on strands that had been perceptible beforehand, yet still marked an important change of emphasis. Its top priority was winning the cold war, including economic recovery, and deterrence of rather than planning for major war. A strategic air campaign using nuclear weapons remained 'the only practical military means of penetrating into Russian territory and bringing the war to a successful conclusion at an early date'. However, nuclear weapons would not necessarily provide a quick victory, so conventional forces were still needed. Defence of the UK also required that a Soviet advance be stopped as far east as possible. Britain should therefore send land forces to Europe (though its land and air defence must be mainly the responsibility of the Continental powers) and make a small contribution to the strategic air offensive. The Middle East must be held. The defence of sea communications was also vital, with Russia expected to seek to isolate Europe from overseas reinforcement and supply. The paper therefore listed the most vital interests as securing the base (which

---

<sup>42</sup> See for example, DO(49)20<sup>th</sup>, 15 November 1949, CAB131/8.

<sup>43</sup> COS(49)313(Final), 'Size and Shape of the Armed Forces over the Next Three Years', 27 September 1949, CAB21/1864.

<sup>44</sup> COS(49)188<sup>th</sup>, 21 December 1949, DEFE4/27.

<sup>45</sup> May, E.R. (ed.), *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993); Gaddis, J.L., *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), especially chapter 4.

involved air defence of the UK and defence of sea communications in Atlantic waters, but with the addition of defending the front in Europe), a contribution to allied striking power, and minimum conventional forces to hold the base in Egypt and British positions in the cold war. It acknowledged that Britain could not do everything and set the top priorities as measures to win the cold war (which included occupation forces in Europe and the conflict in Malaya) and preparations for hot war (including air defence, protection of sea communications in the North Atlantic and home waters, and commitments to the defence of Western Europe). The second category of priorities – still to be pursued though not to the extent that they jeopardise the higher priorities – included a contribution to holding the base in Egypt and to controlling sea communications in the Mediterranean.<sup>46</sup>

The report represented a clear and compelling account of the political and military situation facing the allies but a grave weakness lay in specifying so many ‘essential’ commitments, including the air offensive, the holding of both Western Europe and the Middle East, the defence of North Atlantic, Home and Mediterranean sea communications, and cold war forces. Global Strategy purported to set priorities but there were so many that it provided little indication regarding precisely what could be cut. While this outcome could be dismissed as strategy making by compromise, the alternative was to impose a solution against the judgement of one or more of the services and risk neglecting a key area, based on assumptions that might prove to be flawed. The most important conclusions were that Britain had now committed to sending land and air forces to Western Europe (which was placed above the Middle East in importance) and to fighting the cold war globally. When the report was written, the latter took the form largely of political measures and deterrent forces, but a conflict soon erupted which would increase both the military component of British cold war strategy and the scale of the forces committed in Europe.

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 shook the comfortable assumptions that war was unlikely before 1957 and would be preceded by ample warning time. It appeared to demonstrate that, regardless of the supposed deterrent effect of American strategic air power, the Communist bloc was prepared to resort to direct military attack in addition to intimidation and subversion. General war suddenly seemed far more likely than hitherto and the Defence Committee reluctantly noted that although plans assumed 18 months warning of war, Korea suggested that there could be little or no notice: ‘In these circumstances, the peace-time forces maintained by the United Kingdom were hardly more than bluff.’ Accordingly, in September 1950, Attlee announced significantly increased expenditure and in December, Hugh Gaitskell, the Chancellor, agreed to a further increase in the defence budget of more than a third.<sup>47</sup> While Korea changed the perceived likelihood of hostilities, the type of war envisaged and the capabilities upon which rearmament concentrated were much the same as before. It might seem paradoxical that preparations for a total war centring on Europe were accelerated by a distant regional conflict which was limited politically, geographically and in

---

<sup>46</sup> The paper was approved by the Chiefs at COS(50)68<sup>th</sup>, 28 April 1950, DEFE4/29. The final version was DO(50)45 Final, ‘Defence Policy and Global Strategy’, 7 June 1950, CAB131/9.

<sup>47</sup> DO(50)12<sup>th</sup>, 6 July 1950, CAB131/8; 478 HC DEB, 12 September 1950, cc. 951-52; DO(50)23<sup>rd</sup>, 21 December 1950, CAB131/8. See also Shinwell, E., *Conflict without Malice: An Autobiography* (London: Odhams, 1955), pp.213-18; Dell, *The Chancellors*, pp.147-52.

the weapons used. In fact, the limited nature of the Korean War was seen as exceptional and the focus of planning continued to be a general war with the USSR which would involve nuclear weapons. Rearmament therefore concentrated on global war tasks.

### **New government, new review**

In October 1951, a general election returned the Conservative Party to power, with Winston Churchill as Prime Minister once again. 'Rab' Butler, the new Chancellor, was alarmed by the effect of the defence programme on Britain's balance of payment as well as its high cost, which was rising with inflation.<sup>48</sup> He therefore sought reductions in defence expenditure, reducing in scale the planned rearmament and stretching it over a longer period. The emphasis shifted from readiness to meet an immediate crisis to facing 'the long haul'. In March 1952, the Chiefs of Staff were asked to revise defence plans in the light of technological developments and changes in the international situation since the 1950 paper, and because economic difficulties were calling the rearmament programme into question.<sup>49</sup> Thus began the latest stage in the adaptation of British defence policy to the nuclear age.

The revised 'Defence Policy and Global Strategy' paper was approved in June 1952.<sup>50</sup> The key development was a stronger emphasis on deterring rather than waging total war. US nuclear power would either deter the USSR or, failing that, provide a war-winning capability. The Soviet Union would therefore use other means, so NATO faced a prolonged cold war, yet, if this were waged 'in a patient, level-headed and determined manner', hot war could be avoided. The main nuclear deterrent should be backed by the 'complementary deterrent' of land and air forces, armed with tactical nuclear weapons, to delay a Russian advance until the strategic offensive took effect, to counter infiltration, and for the cold war. UK priorities should be, first, to protect its interests in the cold war; second, to make a contribution to the deterrent (to confer influence with the US and to target objectives of particular importance to Britain, such as submarine and air bases); and third, to prepare for war in case deterrence should fail – all without ruining the economy.<sup>51</sup> Whereas previous plans had envisaged a war in which conventional forces would play a central role – as confirmed by post-Korean War rearmament – Global Strategy sought to reduce the costs of defence by increasing the emphasis on nuclear weapons.

The principal novelty in this paper relating to the role of sea power was its description of the expected course of a future war. It would begin with a phase 'of unparalleled intensity' in which Britain would be subject to attack with atomic weapons as well as a determined offensive against her sea communications. What would follow was uncertain (although enemy activity would be less reduced at sea than ashore) so plans for war should focus on

---

<sup>48</sup> See Howard, A., *RAB: The Life of R.A. Butler* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), pp.178-90; Dell, *The Chancellors*, pp.163-66; Peden, *Arms, Economics and British Strategy*, pp.253-60; Gilmour, I., 'Butler, Richard Austen [Rab], Baron Butler of Saffron Walden (1902–1982)', *DNB*.

<sup>49</sup> This background is set out in C(52)253, Minister of Defence, 'The Defence Programme', 22 July 1952, CAB129/54.

<sup>50</sup> D(52)26, Chiefs of Staff, 'Defence Policy and Global Strategy', 17 June 1952, CAB131/12. See Baylis, J. and Macmillan, A., 'The British global strategy paper of 1952', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.16 No.2 (June 1993).

<sup>51</sup> D(52)26.

this opening phase, not least because preparation for a long war was unaffordable. The report accepted that sea lanes must be kept open or 'the United Kingdom will soon cease to fight and will starve'. Protection of 'the North Atlantic and the United Kingdom's home waters, through which run what are literally the country's lifelines' was a high priority commitment even during the opening phase, 'but provision for it must be conditioned by the probable nature and duration of a future war.'<sup>52</sup>

So, the paper gave a nod in the direction of the need to defend sea communications but could hardly be described as strongly supportive. The prospect of fighting on at sea after the opening, nuclear phase of a war was included in the paper at the insistence of the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Rhoderick McGrigor.<sup>53</sup> The general perception of the concept is suggested by the label attached to it of 'broken-backed' warfare. However, the Admiralty was by no means alone in doubting that a future war would necessarily be short. In discussions with the British Ambassador in Washington, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Omar Bradley explained that the US anticipated a long war which would probably involve a need for re-invasion and liberation of Europe. The Americans generally expected that the war would be long because the air campaign would not prevent the USSR overrunning Europe, although Bradley added: 'There were a few enthusiasts in the US Air Force who thought they could win a quick and easy victory. He did not agree.'<sup>54</sup>

Churchill at times seemed to share the view that the threat to sea communications was serious, telling the House of Commons that three threats could affect Britain's survival, which in order were mines, submarines 'and the threat from the air, ever-growing in its shore-based power'.<sup>55</sup> He was not always consistent, however, at other times playing down the threat at sea.<sup>56</sup> Thus, at a Chiefs of Staff meeting in June 1952, he approved the sections of the 'Global Strategy' draft dealing with the expected length and nature of a future war, and argued that if the strategic air campaign paid sufficient attention to Russian submarine and minelayer bases, 'there was little prospect of the war at sea being very prolonged, since the Russians would have expended their means of replenishment and their bases would be destroyed.'<sup>57</sup> Yet in October 1953, he objected to an Admiralty proposal to scrap the remaining five battleships on the grounds that, 'In the "broken-backed" warfare which was likely to succeed the first atomic phase of a future war, these ships would probably be able to

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid..

<sup>53</sup> According to Darby, the idea was 'a concession to the Navy'; 'Apparently neither Slim nor Slessor took the concept seriously, but it was the price to be paid for McGrigor's acceptance of the paper.' Darby, P., *British Defence Policy East of Suez 1947-68* (London: OUP for RIIA, 1973), p.47. Moore suggests it had more substance than it is normally credited with; Moore, *Royal Navy and Nuclear Weapons*, pp.64-87.

<sup>54</sup> Sir Oliver Franks to Foreign Office, 7 February 1952, DEFE32/2.

<sup>55</sup> 497 HC DEB, 5 March 1952, cc. 440-41.

<sup>56</sup> In the same Commons speech, he claimed that there was 'no potentially hostile surface battlefleet afloat', before listing the Soviet fleet as containing 'three old battleships, about 20 cruisers, and a considerable annual building programme'. For a previous example of his inconsistency with respect to naval power, see Benbow, T., 'Brothers in arms: the Admiralty, the Air Ministry and the Battle of the Atlantic, 1940-43', *Global War Studies*, Vol.11 No.1 (2014), especially pp.83-86.

<sup>57</sup> COS(52)7<sup>th</sup>, 18 June 1952, DEFE32/2.

fulfil a valuable role.’<sup>58</sup> The Air Ministry provided increasingly strident arguments that the Navy should be the target for major reductions in expenditure, especially under Marshal of the RAF Sir John Slessor, who became Chief of the Air Staff in January 1950.<sup>59</sup> As early as his second day in office, he had written an internal memorandum setting out his firm intention to launch a long-planned assault on naval aviation.<sup>60</sup> He continued this effort throughout his time at the top, in August 1952 formally proposing heavy cuts to it.<sup>61</sup>

In Cabinet, Earl Alexander (Minister of Defence)<sup>62</sup> summarised the position as involving no change in the size of the Army, some reduction in the Navy’s Active Fleet, and expanding the RAF for air defence and as a contribution to allied deterrent forces.<sup>63</sup> However, once again Butler demanded further economies. A series of committees failed to unearth cuts of the scale sought, so a further re-think was necessary, and on 7 November 1952 the government decided on ‘a radical review of the pattern of our defence effort’.<sup>64</sup> If modern technology was to be accommodated within a decreasing budget then either commitments would have to be cut dramatically (from which politicians then as now recoiled) or a major alteration in assumptions was needed. As the extended ‘radical review’ process unfolded, the two-phase war concept established by the 1952 Global Strategy paper, over-simplified and shorn of most of the qualifications included in the document, was turned against the Navy, which was far and away the principal target for attack.<sup>65</sup>

### The ‘Radical Review’

The first committee of the review comprised officials from the key ministries and the Chiefs of Staff, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Norman Brook.<sup>66</sup> It reaffirmed the conclusions of the 1952 Global Strategy paper, including the need to defend sea communications and the impossibility of planning only for a short war. No significant savings could be made without ‘major changes in defence policy’, it noted, which required decisions by ministers rather than

---

<sup>58</sup> For the Admiralty plan, see D(53)47, First Lord, ‘Future of Certain Units of the Reserve Fleet’, 13 October 1953; for Churchill’s response, D(53)13<sup>th</sup>, 14 October 1953, both CAB131/13.

<sup>59</sup> Hastings, M., ‘Slessor, Sir John Cotesworth (1897–1979)’, *DNB*. For Slessor’s thoughts, see Slessor, J., *Strategy for the West* (London: Cassell, 1954) and *The Great Deterrent* (London, Cassell, 1957); also Orange, V., *Slessor: Bomber Champion* (London: Grub Street, 2006).

<sup>60</sup> CAS to ACAS, 2 January 1950, AIR 8/1592. His personal papers contain a 1950 document he wrote, entitled ‘Rough Notes on Method of Challenging the Proportion of our total Defence Resources allocated to Naval Aviation’, AIR75/16. His intention to mount this campaign is set out in ‘Random thoughts’, 21 October 1946 and AMP to VCAS, 8 December 1946, ‘More Random Thoughts on Air Staff Policy vis-à-vis the Navy’, AIR20/6566.

<sup>61</sup> See RDP/P(52)6, 12 August 1952, also RDP/P(52)8, 13 August 1952, both DEFE10/163.

<sup>62</sup> Earl Alexander of Tunis became Minister of Defence in March 1952 when Churchill ceased the continuation of his wartime practice of combining the position with that of Prime Minister; Hunt, D., ‘Alexander, Harold Rupert Leofric George, first Earl Alexander of Tunis (1891–1969)’, *DNB*. He should not be confused with A.V. Alexander, mentioned above, the Labour Minister of Defence from December 1946 to February 1950.

<sup>63</sup> C(52)316, Minister of Defence, ‘The Defence Programme’, 3 October 1952, CAB129/55.

<sup>64</sup> CM(52)94<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, 7 November 1952, CAB128/25.

<sup>65</sup> For a detailed analysis of the ‘radical review’, see Benbow, T., ‘British Naval Aviation and the “Radical Review”, 1953–1955’, in *British Naval Aviation: The First 100 Years* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); also Bell, C.M., *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp.312–20.

<sup>66</sup> Theakston, K., ‘Brook, Norman Craven, Baron Normanbrook (1902–1967)’, *DNB*.

officials.<sup>67</sup> The review's subsequent committees were composed of ministers, usually not involving the Chiefs of Staff but calling on them for advice as required.

The first of these higher-level bodies was the 'Ministerial Committee on Defence Policy',<sup>68</sup> which in addition to Churchill, Butler, Alexander and the three service ministers included the two individuals who would lead the assault on the Navy during the radical review – both of whom were close to Churchill and increasingly influenced him as his health deteriorated.<sup>69</sup> Lord Swinton was Commonwealth Secretary but had been the pre-war Secretary of State for Air who unsuccessfully resisted the return to the Navy of the Fleet Air Arm.<sup>70</sup> Duncan Sandys, Churchill's son-in-law, sat on the committee as Minister of Supply (overseeing the production of aircraft and other equipment and hence playing a role in defence policy).<sup>71</sup> The Admiralty perceived Sandys as deeply hostile, with one of his memoranda being described as 'virulent' and a 'diatribe against the Navy.'<sup>72</sup>

Whereas both the Global Strategy paper and the Brook committee had rejected the option of concentrating on the initial, nuclear phase of a global war, Sandys set the foundations for what would follow by insisting that this opening period would be decisive. Any preparations for the 'broken-backed warfare' that would follow were therefore low priority and in effect unnecessary. He placed operations at sea firmly in this category and therefore argued for deep cuts in the Navy.<sup>73</sup> The rest of the committee acquiesced with this dramatically new approach to defence priorities. Alexander instructed the Chiefs that, 'Forces which would not have a decisive effect upon our survival through the opening phase but would be needed in an ensuing period of "broken-backed" warfare' – in which he explicitly included those for the defence of sea communications – should be the lowest priority. They should be funded only after the needs of the higher priorities (forces for cold war commitments and for the opening period of war) had been fully met. The broad strategic vision that informed these arguments was illuminated by the instruction, simply asserted without any supporting evidence or analysis, 'It should be assumed that, in view of the

---

<sup>67</sup> Brook to Prime Minister, 21 May 1953, PREM11/616. The committee papers are in CAB134/810; the final report is DP(M)(53)2, 'The Future Course of Defence Expenditure', 20 May 1953, CAB134/809. It actually recommended a small increase in the budget; Jackson and Bramall, *The Chiefs*, p.286.

<sup>68</sup> Its papers are in CAB134/809.

<sup>69</sup> Churchill suffered a second, major stroke in June 1953; Gilbert, M., *Winston S. Churchill 1945-1965, Volume VII: 'Never Despair'* (London: Heinemann, 1988), pp. 846-57.

<sup>70</sup> Robbins, K., 'Lister, Philip Cunliffe- , first earl of Swinton (1884–1972)', *DNB*. His views had changed little since 17 July 1936, when he told the Cabinet, 'the fundamental thing is that the Fleet Air Arm is an integral part and branch of the Air Force'. Cross, J.A., *Lord Swinton* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), pp.135-219; quotation pp.180-81. The strength of his own feelings on the issue comes across clearly in his memoir, Swinton, Viscount, *I Remember* (London: Hutchinson, 1948), pp.135-36, 140-43.

<sup>71</sup> Ludlow, N.P., 'Sandys, (Edwin) Duncan, Baron Duncan-Sandys (1908–1987)', *DNB*.

<sup>72</sup> Head of M., 'Radical Review', 17 November 1953, ADM205/92. One of McGrigor's colleagues wrote, 'The PM is said to have remarked of Mussolini that at least he had the pleasure of shooting his son-in-law.' Director of Plans to First Sea Lord, 21 November 1953, ADM205/92.

<sup>73</sup> DP(M)(53)5, Minister of Supply, 'Review of Defence Expenditure', 15 June 1953, CAB134/809. Later in the year, he proposed an additional £2m for the RAF budget, with cuts of 5% to the Army and 20% to the Navy; Sandys to Chancellor and Minister of Defence, 23 July 1953, T225/313.



increasing range of shore-based aircraft, and the development of guided missiles, carrier-borne aircraft will in future play a less important strategic role.<sup>74</sup>

The Chiefs of Staff united to oppose this drive, criticising both the assumptions and the deductions drawn from them. They rejected the attempt to categorize military capabilities in this way, dismissed the assertion that survival would depend only on the opening period of a war (or that it was possible to firmly predict how a future war would unfold), and noted that the minister had quite contradicted the endorsed Global Strategy paper.<sup>75</sup> McGrigor insisted that protecting sea communications would be vital both in the initial stages of war (thus disagreeing with the category in which the task was placed) and also after the opening period (thus disputing the idea that the third category could be disregarded).<sup>76</sup> It was reasonable to suggest that the USSR foresaw a role for naval forces in a nuclear war; as Phillip Newell, Head of Military Branch in the Admiralty, wrote, the fact that it was still building cruisers showed that it believed it would have 'surface ships on the loose during the atomic phase'.<sup>77</sup>

Sandys and his fellow travellers sought to focus strategy narrowly in terms of the scenario planned for (the initial six-week 'survival' period of a war) and the composition of the deterrent (nuclear-armed bombers alone, not conventional forces). The Admiralty questioned the predicted nature of a future war on which the anti-Navy case rested. The Director of Naval Intelligence suggested that cities might not be subject to nuclear attack early in a war, which precluded the possibility of Russia being defeated in six weeks. Hence it was reasonable to plan for a survival period of six months, which made defending sea communications more important.<sup>78</sup> McGrigor found an apt quotation: 'It will be a violent storm but very short. I count on a war of three months, and I have organised all my policy on that assumption'. He continued, 'This was not said by the present Minister of Defence or Supply, but by the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg in August 1914 and quoted in Prince Bulow's memoirs. I feel it is too good to waste.'<sup>79</sup> They had allies in their scepticism about the politically convenient assumptions of their critics. Field Marshal Sir John Harding, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, noted that the growing Soviet nuclear capability undermined the policy of massive retaliation, while Sir Frederick Brundrett (who in 1954 became chief scientific adviser to the Minister of Defence and chairman of the defence research policy committee)<sup>80</sup> predicted that as the West lost its nuclear advantage over the USSR, the weight placed on the secondary, conventional deterrent would have to increase.<sup>81</sup> The First Sea Lord with the support of the other Chiefs pointed out that the Ministerial Sub-

---

<sup>74</sup> Note by Minister of Defence, 19 June 1953, Annex to COS(53)328, 'Radical Review', 8 July 1953, DEFE5/47. Its close resemblance to previous papers written by Slessor, cited above, suggests an Air Ministry influence.

<sup>75</sup> COS(53)332, 'Radical Review: Implications of Service Tables', 9 July 1953, and COS(53)336, 'The Radical Review', 11 July 1953, both DEFE5/47.

<sup>76</sup> COS(53)76<sup>th</sup>, 22 June 1953 and COS(53)80<sup>th</sup>, 26 June 1953, both DEFE4/63.

<sup>77</sup> Brief for First Lord, 10 July 1953, ADM205/89.

<sup>78</sup> DNI 8642, 22 January 1954, ADM205/94.

<sup>79</sup> First Sea Lord to Head of M., 12 February 1954, ADM205/95.

<sup>80</sup> He had been head of the Royal Naval Scientific Service (1946-1950) and then deputy scientific advisor to the Minister of Defence; Powell, R., 'Brundrett, Sir Frederick (1894-1974)', *DNB*.

<sup>81</sup> Meeting between COS and Foreign Office representatives, 2 February 1954, 'US Strategic Policy', DEFE32/4.

Committee was contradicting the agreed approach of Global Strategy by playing down the cold war (to which they had given top priority) and deterrence in favour of the opening period of a hot war. They also objected that the priority attached to the first six weeks of a war 'had been wrongly interpreted to exclude further peacetime preparations outside that period'.<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the different stages of the radical review, the principal – and it often seemed the only – target for those seeking savings was the Navy in general and, in particular, the fleet carriers and their strike capability. Those attacking naval aviation had a range of motives. In large part the campaign was a re-fighting of old ideological battles that the air enthusiasts had lost; this category included Swinton as well as former Chiefs of the Air Staff who now chipped in from the House of Lords, such as Lord Trenchard and Lord Tedder. This category overlapped with those fighting to expand the current RAF at the expense of the Navy, including the Secretary of State throughout this period, Lord De L'Isle<sup>83</sup> and many serving officers in the Air Staff. However, its Chief, Marshal of the RAF Sir William Dickson – who had served at sea during the First World War with the Royal Naval Air Service – was notably less aggressive than his predecessor in the post.<sup>84</sup> Others were swayed by the simplistic argument that land-based air power was eclipsing sea power in general and naval aviation in particular; these included the fading star that was Churchill, still seduced by the mirage of strategic bombing,<sup>85</sup> as well as Sandys (who often proved susceptible to extravagant claims made on behalf of new technology).<sup>86</sup> The Chancellor and the Treasury were happy, as always, to exploit the anti-Navy campaign in order to achieve savings, though they would have been equally content to see these come from other areas of the defence programme.

A detailed account of the arguments for and against the fleet carriers and the strike capability of the Fleet Air Arm is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>87</sup> The key argument offered against this core capability was that, while there might be a case for light fleet carriers for limited defence of shipping against air attack and submarines, Britain could not afford the more expensive fleet carriers and their strike capability – for which the US could be relied upon. Its roles should be left to the US or to increasingly capable shore-based aircraft, which could fulfil the roles of naval aviation more effectively and more economically. Some critics accepted that a strike component was needed against surface warships (others argued that even this role should be left to land-based aircraft or US carriers) but the use of carrier

---

<sup>82</sup> COS(53)121<sup>st</sup>, 27 October 1953; COS(53)130<sup>th</sup>, 17 November 1953; COS(53)131<sup>st</sup>, 23 November 1953: all DEFE4/66; DP(M)(53)17, Chiefs of Staff, 'UK Defence Policy', 26 November 1953, CAB134/809.

<sup>83</sup> Masefield, P.G., 'Sidney, William Philip, first Viscount de L'Isle (1909–1991)', *DNB*.

<sup>84</sup> Dickson indicated to McGrigor that the impetus within the Air Ministry for the anti-Navy push was coming primarily from the Secretary of State; First Sea Lord to First Lord, 22 December 1953, ADM205/93. Dickson was seen as more conciliatory than Slessor; Jackson and Bramall, *The Chiefs*, pp.288-89. For his background, see Probert, H.A., 'Dickson, Sir William Forster (1898–1987)', *DNB*.

<sup>85</sup> Indeed, in March 1945 he had told the then First Lord of the Admiralty, 'You must realise that after the war the Air will take a very large part of the duties hitherto discharged by the Navy.' Cited by Simpson, M., 'Admiral Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope (1943-1946)', in Murfett, M.H. (ed.), *The First Sea Lords from Fisher to Mountbatten* (London: Praeger, 1995), p.211.

<sup>86</sup> Later in the 1950s, as Minister of Defence, Sandys seized on the development of surface-to-air missiles to argue that manned fighters and anti-aircraft guns were obsolete, causing consternation in all three services.

<sup>87</sup> The arguments relating to naval aviation are covered in greater depth in Benbow, 'British Naval Aviation and the "Radical Review"'.

aircraft against shore targets came in for particular criticism, as duplicating the jealously protected role of the RAF bomber force.<sup>88</sup> In defence of the fleet carriers, the Admiralty insisted that the ability to protect sea communications was a core part of the deterrent to war. Fleet carriers provided cover against heavy air or surface attack and were therefore essential to the operation of other, lighter naval forces. They also offered the ability to hit targets outside the range of land-based aircraft. Their tasks should no more be abandoned and entirely left to the US than should those of the bomber force; doing so would have the same detrimental effect on Britain's voice in allied strategy. Britain was the only European state that could offer fleet carriers, whereas many deployed land-based aircraft; besides, according to NATO plans there would be no US fleet carriers in European waters for at least the first two weeks of the war. Moreover, once the Fleet Air Arm was equipped with nuclear weapons, it could make a useful contribution to the primary deterrent – which would be particularly valuable in the light of the increasing vulnerability of the V-bombers. The carrier case tended to follow that of its critics in focussing primarily on total war, but there were some references to the utility of carriers in the cold war, notably their ability to reach the area of a crisis before land-based aircraft could be deployed, and their economy in view of the fact that they avoided the need to build expensive air bases.<sup>89</sup>

This first stage of the radical review saw a reprieve for the Admiralty when the key February 1954 meeting of the ministerial committee decided to retain the fleet carriers, while requesting further studies.<sup>90</sup> The threat was seen off for now, if not defeated.

The Admiralty also seemed to be gaining some traction with its wider case about the nature of a future war. While the 1954 Defence White Paper stated that a global war would see both sides use nuclear weapons in a short and immensely destructive opening phase, it went on: 'If no decisive result were reached in this opening phase, hostilities would decline in intensity, though perhaps less so at sea than elsewhere, and a period of "broken-backed" warfare would follow, during which the opposing sides would seek to recover their strength, carrying on the struggle in the meantime as best they might.'<sup>91</sup> During the parliamentary debate on the White Paper, Nigel Birch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Defence) stressed that a 'firm defensive shield in Europe' was almost as important a part of the deterrent as the threat of nuclear weapons. This included a requirement for conventional weapons at sea, to maintain the flow of supplies to Britain and to the continent. The Navy was concentrating on countering mines and submarines, yet: 'The carrier also has a vital role to play. At present, there is no other way of dealing with enemy bombers over the open sea or, perhaps more important, of dealing with enemy reconnaissance aircraft shadowing our convoys.' Besides, instead of hot war there might be a continuation of cold war, as in Korea,

---

<sup>88</sup> The case against the Navy and the carriers is in DP(M)(53)15, Minister of Supply, 'Defence Policy and Expenditure', 20 November 1953; DP(M)(53)16, Secretary of State for Air, 'Defence Priorities', 17 November 1953; and DP(M)(54)5, Minister of Supply, 'Naval Air', 29 January 1954; a more moderate account is DP(M)(53)13, annex to Note by Minister of Defence, 'Naval Air', 21 January 1954; all CAB134/809.

<sup>89</sup> The case for the carriers is in DP(M)(53)14, First Lord, 'Role of Aircraft Carriers', 14 November 1953 and DP(M)(54)2, First Lord, 'Naval Air', 27 January 1954, both CAB134/809; also briefs in ADM205/94.

<sup>90</sup> DP(M)(54)2<sup>nd</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1954, CAB134/809.

<sup>91</sup> *Statement on Defence 1954, Cmd 9075* (1954).

Malaya and Indochina: 'To carry on a cold war there must be troops armed with conventional weapons. What good are atomic weapons in Malaya?'<sup>92</sup>

### **The 1954 strategy paper**

British strategy was still in the early stages of coming to terms with the nuclear age. Some air power advocates tended to depict a future war as a rerun of the Second World War but with a more effective Anglo-American strategic bombing offensive. The harsh reality began to dawn. A January 1954 report on the initial stages of a total war estimated that Britain would suffer two million casualties, eight million people would be made homeless, London would not be practicable as a city to live in or as a seat of government 'for an indefinite period' and the country would lose 75% of its rail network, 60% of its gas supplies and 40% of its electricity generation. It predicted, with classic British understatement, that civilian morale would be 'poor'.<sup>93</sup> Yet this report took account only of fission weapons and not the hydrogen bomb which would be far more destructive. As the implications of the H-bomb sank in, British policy faced another rethink.<sup>94</sup> In April 1954, another ministerial body was established, referred to as the 'Salisbury Committee' after its chairman. Its remit was to take account of the new factor of thermonuclear weapons but also to reduce defence spending by about ten per cent.<sup>95</sup> While such a saving would require a major change in defence policy, such a shift was now plausible: the Joint Intelligence Committee judged that the H-bomb made global war unlikely, raising the prospect of economies in war stocks and reserves.<sup>96</sup> Once again, the Chiefs were tasked to revise British strategy.

The principal conclusion of 'United Kingdom Defence Policy' was that the H-bomb made general war far less likely than previous reports had believed. If there should be a war, it would involve nuclear weapons from the outset (as well as attacks by Soviet conventional forces) and would devastate the UK. However, NATO military strength meant that the USSR was unlikely to provoke a war for the next few years, so some risks could prudently be taken with war preparations. The cold war, on the other hand, was likely to last a long time. Britain's priority should therefore be preventing global war, which required the 'main deterrent' of nuclear weapons with conventional forces as 'an essential complement'. Yet the prevention of general war also required that Britain maintain its influence as a world power and meet its cold war commitments, in part to prevent a local war that could escalate. Forces for influence and for the cold war should therefore be prioritised above those for fighting a general war. Large cuts in conventional forces could harm NATO but capabilities that would be unavailable immediately on the outbreak of global war could be safely reduced. For the Navy, 'Preparations for the control of sea communications are not only reduced in priority but may well be altered in form.' However, the USSR would launch concerted attacks on Western sea communications from the outset of the war, so there was still a need to defend shipping and to destroy the enemy's fleet, merchant shipping and bases – and although the

---

<sup>92</sup> 524 HC DEB, 2 March 1954, cc. 1021-30.

<sup>93</sup> COS(54)16, 'Problems of the Armed Forces in the Initial Phase of a War', 15 January 1954, DEFE5/51.

<sup>94</sup> See for example the work of the 1954-55 Strath Committee, in CAB134/1174.

<sup>95</sup> The papers of this committee are in CAB134/808.

<sup>96</sup> Brook to Prime Minister, 3 May 1954, PREM11/840.

nuclear exchange would probably decide the outcome of the war, fighting would continue thereafter albeit on a smaller scale. There could be some reduction in minesweepers and perhaps escorts, due to the reduced requirement for imports. In addition to these wartime tasks the main role of the Navy in peacetime would be to support Britain's worldwide interests, which required 'a balanced fleet including ships of all types except battleships'.<sup>97</sup>

The 1954 strategy paper therefore represented a significant shift in British policy – the most noteworthy conceptual change in the period considered by this paper. In addition to deterring war (for which conventional forces including navies were essential), the principal concerns of strategy and defence policy were given as peacetime responsibilities and the cold war, rather than preparations to fight a major war. For these vital peacetime and limited war roles, sea power offered particular advantages in terms of projecting power and influence around the world. The strategy paper therefore appeared to provide the Navy with the firmest foundation it had enjoyed since the end of the war. However, other agendas meant that some in government were reluctant to fully embrace the implications of this change of course in British strategy.

The report of the Salisbury committee listed cuts volunteered by the three services.<sup>98</sup> The Navy proposed to scrap large numbers of ships in the lower categories of the reserve to focus on those that would be ready soon after mobilisation. Some planned conversions were cancelled and the new construction programme was extended over a longer period, as well as being confined to ships needed in war but which would also have the highest value in peace and the cold war (such as the *Tiger*-class cruisers and the *Hermes*-class light fleet carriers). The resulting defence programme was still considerably more expensive than the Chancellor was prepared to concede, so yet another committee was established to identify further savings. The composition of the 'Cabinet Committee on Defence Review' raises a suspicion that it was designed, principally by Brook, to reach a pre-determined outcome.<sup>99</sup> While Churchill attended some meetings, its core membership was just three men – Swinton (who had already shown his hand in the earlier stages of the radical review) as chair, Sandys (the most implacable opponent of the Navy) and the often ineffectual Lord Alexander, the Minister of Defence.<sup>100</sup> The latter had changed his earlier views and now supported the Navy's case on the fleet carriers and the strike component of the Fleet Air Arm.<sup>101</sup> He was about to be absent for a fortnight on a visit to the US but Brook via the Prime Minister

---

<sup>97</sup> The report was approved at COS(54)65<sup>th</sup>, 31 May 1954, DEFE4/70. It was presented to the Cabinet as C(54)249, 'United Kingdom Defence Policy', 31 May 1954, CAB129/69.

<sup>98</sup> C(54)250, Lord President, 'Report by the Committee on Defence Policy', 24 July 1954, CAB129/69.

<sup>99</sup> Brook proposed to Churchill the establishment of a small committee, and its membership; Brook to Prime Minister, 26 July 1954, PREM11/617. Thereafter, he encouraged Churchill in his anti-Navy line.

<sup>100</sup> He had only accepted the position out of a feeling of duty and was reluctant to assert himself over others; Nicolson, N., *Alex: The Life of Field Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), pp.301-03; Jackson and Bramall, *The Chiefs*, pp.282-83. This generally held impression makes the robust stance he was to take against Swinton and Sandys all the more remarkable.

<sup>101</sup> In part, this was due to a paper he requested from the Admiralty which among other topics explained the role of the carriers; 'The Navy of the Future', 2 March 1954, ADM205/102. Alexander praised the document, stating, 'I think it shows a great deal of imagination and careful forward looking thought'. Grove suggests that Brundrett, 'McGrigor's friend at court in the Ministry of Defence', had helped to persuade the Minister; Grove, E.J., 'Admiral Sir Rhoderick McGrigor (1951-1955)', in Murfett, *The First Sea Lords*, p.257.

suggested that the other two members of the committee should start work anyway. Working at a pace unusual in Whitehall, they held a series of meetings, completed their analysis and produced a draft report before Alexander returned to join them.<sup>102</sup>

The Swinton Committee was the most controversial of the this period, the most bitterly fought and the most precisely targeted at sea power in general and naval aviation in particular. Whereas the Chiefs of Staff strategy paper, which was endorsed by the Cabinet, had minimised the importance of the initial period of a global war, this committee decided that there should be an even closer concentration on it. Moreover, they argued that exactly the same forces were needed to wage the cold war as to fight a hot one.<sup>103</sup> Their investigation spent little time on the Army programme and waved through that of the RAF; they made no recommendations for substantive change to either. They focused almost exclusively on the Navy, and in particular on the fleet carriers and the strike capability of the Fleet Air Arm. Their detailed arguments were much the same as those from earlier in the review, particularly the claim that land-based aircraft could perform the roles of fleet carriers more effectively and more economically. British carriers should be withdrawn from NATO Striking Fleet, the main role of which was (they asserted, incorrectly) to attack targets ashore in support of the land battle, and should limit themselves to defending sea communications.

What the Navy referred to as the ‘Swinton-Sandys inquisition’<sup>104</sup> did not confine itself to criticising the case for the fleet carriers; it also proffered some bold proclamations about sea power itself: ‘In the new strategic conditions, the relative importance of sea power in our defence is evidently diminishing and there is no sign that this trend will be arrested. There can be no question of having a larger Navy than we need, or can afford; and we must make the best use of existing material. It is natural that the Navy should wish to have their share in air power which is growing in importance.’<sup>105</sup> Worryingly for the Navy, these words originated with Churchill and Brook, who also explicitly disagreed with Alexander’s plea to ‘continue to keep three balanced services’, mainly because the carrier was becoming ‘obsolescent’ and ‘the days of manned aircraft are numbered’,<sup>106</sup> making their continued faith in manned aircraft in the RAF rather puzzling.

The Admiralty fought back furiously, insisting that sea power was every bit as important as it had ever been, not least in its ability to provide ‘that essential strategic and tactical mobility which cannot be given to land-based aircraft’. It pointed out that carriers were considerably less vulnerable than air bases in fixed and known locations, and argued that even if the fleet carriers were removed from NATO Striking Fleet (at high cost to British influence in the alliance), they would still need the same aircraft to counter enemy aircraft, submarines and surface warships. Moreover, carriers had enormous value both as part of the

---

<sup>102</sup> Its papers are in CAB134/811.

<sup>103</sup> DR(54)2<sup>nd</sup> and DR(54)3<sup>rd</sup>, 4 August 1954; both CAB134/811.

<sup>104</sup> VCNS to First Sea Lord, 23 August 1954, ADM205/97.

<sup>105</sup> DR(54)9, ‘Revised draft report’, 11 September 1954, CAB134/811.

<sup>106</sup> Brook to Churchill, 6 September 1954, and Churchill, ‘Notes’, 7 September 1954, both PREM11/617. Churchill confirmed that the controversial sections of the report ‘corresponded with his own conception of the effect which changing strategic conditions were having on the Navy’; DR(54)9<sup>th</sup>, 28 September 1954, CAB134/811. Also Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, pp.315-16, 318-19.

deterrent to general war and in the cold war.<sup>107</sup> The evidence suggested that the USSR anticipated a major struggle over sea communications in a future war, with Naval Intelligence reporting that their output of ocean-going submarines had increased from 54 in 1953 to 74 in 1954.<sup>108</sup> Alexander now firmly supported the Navy, repeating the criticism that the Swinton committee wilfully misrepresented the principal role of Striking Fleet, which was to provide cover for lighter forces protecting sea communications and attack at source of threats to it.<sup>109</sup> Swinton and Sandys simply ignored the input of the third member of their committee, despite his position; their final report was unchanged from the draft to which Alexander had objected so strenuously, to the extent of threatening to resign.<sup>110</sup>

The stakes were high; Newell commented that the decision over the Swinton report could be ‘as grave as any that has faced the Navy in history’, and concluded: ‘Minesweepers apart, we have gone as far as we can without becoming a French Navy.’<sup>111</sup> Still, the Swinton-Sandys line was flirting with collapse, ignoring as it did the recent shift from focusing on fighting the first six weeks of a hot war, to deterring that war and waging the cold war around the world. Their conception of what constituted the deterrent to war was the narrowest possible, and also went against the military advice that the Chiefs of Staff presented in a strong common front – as well as going against what the Soviet Union evidently believed would be important in a future war. Their arguments simply failed to engage with the evident utility of naval forces, especially carriers, in limited war and crisis. The offensive by Swinton and Sandys therefore ran out of momentum; with the resolute opposition of the Admiralty and the Minister of Defence, and without the strong backing of the Chief of the Air Staff, it faced an uphill battle. This was compounded by the absence of Sandys from a key meeting of the committee – it was his turn to be abroad – and while Swinton stuck to his guns, Churchill no longer had his former dominant presence. The meeting reached a conclusion that appeared relatively anodyne, that the Minister of Defence and the Admiralty should continue to review naval aviation, but the sting had been drawn from the attack on the Royal Navy.<sup>112</sup> By the next meeting of the committee in October 1954, a government reshuffle had seen Sandys depart the Ministry of Supply for the Ministry of Housing, ending his central role in defence matters for the time being, at least. Alexander, who had become a staunch supporter of the Admiralty on these matters, was replaced as Minister of Defence by Harold Macmillan – who took office, auspiciously, on Trafalgar Day.<sup>113</sup>

He too supported the Admiralty position against the lone voice of Swinton, arguing that the latter’s proposals would save far less than he had claimed while the price in lost capability would be high. The Chief of the Air Staff backed the Navy and the Treasury was

<sup>107</sup> The Admiralty’s response to the Swinton committee is in a series of papers in ADM205/98.

<sup>108</sup> Head of M. to First Sea Lord, ‘C(54)250 – The Report on Defence Policy to be taken at tomorrow’s Cabinet’, 26 July 1954, also DNI to First Sea Lord, 26 July 1954, both ADM205/97. The figure for Soviet production in 1954 alone was greater than the entire German submarine force on the outbreak of the Second World War.

<sup>109</sup> Alexander to Churchill, 25 August 1954, PREM11/617.

<sup>110</sup> Alexander to Churchill, 13 August 1954, PREM11/706. Apparently Alexander ‘was vexed at Duncan’s intervention’; Churchill to Swinton, 19 August 1954, PREM11/617.

<sup>111</sup> Head of M. to First Sea Lord, 13 September 1954, ADM205/98.

<sup>112</sup> DR(54)9<sup>th</sup>, 28 September 1954, considering DR(54)12, ‘Revised draft report’, 24 September 1954, both CAB134/811.

<sup>113</sup> Thorpe, D.R., *Supermac: The Life of Harold Macmillan* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2010), p.291.

mollified with other savings; the matter passed to the Cabinet.<sup>114</sup> The paper submitted by Churchill retained the recommendation to slash naval aviation as well as the assertion that sea power was declining in strategic importance; the accompanying Admiralty paper contained an implicit threat that the Board of Admiralty would resign if it were approved.<sup>115</sup> They did not need to take this step. Macmillan had read a paper by Brundrett, arguing that the Swinton committee had ignored the Chiefs' advice that the deterrent and limited war should take priority over preparations for hot war. Brundrett saw the carriers and naval aviation as being 'fully justified on the basis of the warm war need', which would only increase with the increasing emphasis on deterring global war.<sup>116</sup> This argument seems to have struck a chord with Macmillan,<sup>117</sup> whose strong defence of the fleet carriers and their strike capability included their hot war roles (notably the need to attack Soviet surface warships as well as the influence they conferred over the use of NATO Striking Fleet) but also set great store by the value of carrier air power in local wars that were likely to become more common in light of the approaching nuclear standoff.<sup>118</sup> The Cabinet accepted the arguments of the Admiralty (conveyed by McGrigor in a highly effective presentation)<sup>119</sup> and the Minister of Defence and left the final decision to the latter.<sup>120</sup> His final paper backed the role of naval aviation including a strike component in hot war but also in warm war and recommended that the carriers retain their current complement and role.<sup>121</sup> Macmillan went on to back the Admiralty in the remaining questions from the earlier assault, not least continuing the programme for the new naval strike aircraft.<sup>122</sup>

The Navy had come through the trials of the early 1950s with colours flying. The controversy over the nature of future war, and the role of conventional forces within it, was not yet definitively resolved and would recur. Yet at least Admiralty had seen off its attackers and achieved a general acceptance that there was a role for sea power and the Royal Navy, including naval aviation, in a future war. The February 1955 Defence White Paper emphasised the importance of thermonuclear weapons (as well as announcing the decision to acquire them)<sup>123</sup> and stressed the centrality of nuclear deterrence. Yet it also underlined the importance of conventional forces, including the Navy; nuclear weapons 'do not radically alter the role of any of the three fighting Services' and each would contribute to the deterrent, the cold war and fighting a major war, in which both land and naval forces would be needed, although their weapons, organisation, tactics and training would be 'profoundly affected'. In

<sup>114</sup> DR(54)10<sup>th</sup>, 26 October 1954, discussing DR(54)14, 13 October 1954, Minister of Defence, 'Naval Expenditure', both CAB134/811.

<sup>115</sup> C(54)329, Prime Minister, 'Defence Policy', 3 November 1954; C(54)332, First Lord, 'Defence Policy: Fleet Air Arm', 4 November 1954, both CAB129/71. Confirmation of the resignation threat is in Head of M. Branch to First Sea Lord, 13 September 1954, ADM205/98.

<sup>116</sup> Brundrett to Minister of Defence, 18 November 1954, DEFE13/66.

<sup>117</sup> He set considerable store by Brundrett's advice, describing him in his memoirs as his 'chief support' as Minister of Defence; Macmillan, H., *Tides of Fortune 1945-55* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p.562.

<sup>118</sup> MISC/M(54)123<sup>rd</sup>, 6 December 1954, DEFE13/66.

<sup>119</sup> Grove, 'Admiral Sir Rhoderick McGrigor', pp. 258-59.

<sup>120</sup> CC(54)73<sup>rd</sup> Conclusions, 5 November 1954, CAB128/27.

<sup>121</sup> D(55)1, Minister of Defence, 'Defence Policy: Heavy Aircraft Carriers', 7 January 1955, approved by the Defence Committee at D(55)1<sup>st</sup>, 13 January 1955; both CAB131/15.

<sup>122</sup> D(55)3<sup>rd</sup>, 15 March 1955, CAB131/15.

<sup>123</sup> Hennessy, P., *Cabinet* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.135-41.



terms of the Navy specifically, while it mentioned the utility of naval forces in limited war, it also noted the growth of the Soviet Navy, the importance of defending sea communications ‘without which we cannot for long survive’, and the need to make some provision for operations after the initial phase of a war.<sup>124</sup>

A few weeks later, in April 1955, there was a change at the top table as Churchill finally retired, handing over as Prime Minister to Anthony Eden. McGrigor was succeeded as First Sea Lord by Earl Mountbatten of Burma. Another defence review would swiftly follow, driven as always by the need to fit ambitious policy goals into a squeezed budget. But while the role of the Navy would be an important element of the unfolding debate, the threat it faced was never as fundamental as it had been in the previous years – despite the appointment in January 1957 of Duncan Sandys as Minister of Defence.

## **Conclusion**

The ten years following the end of the Second World War saw enormous challenges for British policy and strategy, which had to come to terms with the developing cold war as well as the impact of nuclear weapons. One of the central features of this process was an attack of unprecedented severity on the Royal Navy’s core capability, naval aviation, and even more broadly on the very place of sea power in British strategy. It is truly remarkable that a state with the geography, history, and political and economic interests of Britain should lapse into such existential doubt about its need for sea power. While debates over the precise capabilities required of the Royal Navy would become a recurrent theme of post-1945 British defence policy, the attack was never again as acute as it was in the early 1950s.

The principal source of this onslaught was the Air Ministry, where many individuals were still fighting old battles based on theories about strategic air power that had been thoroughly discredited during the war but which nonetheless refused to lay down and die. They fought alongside some powerful ministerial critics such as Duncan Sandys and, at times, Churchill and initially Lord Alexander, the Minister of Defence. This sceptical core found allies of convenience among ministers and officials, mainly from the Treasury but also including Brook, the Cabinet Secretary, who were simply content to attack a convenient target that apparently offered significant savings. The case of the critics was based around a narrowly framed view of a future war as short and inevitably nuclear from the outset, together with a denial that there was any requirement to defend sea communications in such a war. This claim was extended to deny that a capability to defend them was part of the deterrent to war. The Navy’s tormentors further reflected their ideological hinterland by asserting the superiority of land-based air power over navies and naval aviation in particular.

The Admiralty marshalled an effective case which allowed it to build on the sympathy of other key departments such as the Foreign Office, to convert Lord Alexander and to build on common interests with Dickson as Chief of the Air Staff. They convinced enough ministers that there was a need to defend sea communications in global war, all the more if it became prolonged or if nuclear weapons were not used at the start. Forces capable of

---

<sup>124</sup> *Statement on Defence 1955 – Cmd 9391* (1955).

defending them were a vital part of the deterrent to war both directly and in terms of solidifying the Western alliance on which British strategy increasingly depended. The Admiralty further succeeded in making the case that the defence of sea communications required a surface navy including fleet carriers with advanced fighters and strike aircraft. As waging global war lost its central place as the main focus of strategy, fighting the cold war and maintaining Britain's position as a world power moved up the policy agenda. Here, naval power continued to offer distinct advantages to policy-makers.

In these debates, the 'dog that did not bark' (though at times it did growl noticeably) was the role of Navy in general and of carriers in particular in limited war, as had been demonstrated in Korea. It is perhaps surprising that this was not more of a focus given the growing prominence of this theme in the reviews of this period. This role, however, would soon become increasingly central for the Royal Navy as doubts grew over its place in total war, even becoming its main focus during the 1957 defence review. During the first decade after the end of the Second World War, however, relatively little attention was devoted to military intervention outside Europe. The focus was very much on general war.

The Admiralty faced a formidable array of critics who sought to bring down the Navy either as an end in itself or as a means to the end of reducing the defence budget. That these repeated and high-stakes attacks were, to a large degree, successfully fought off was no mean achievement. It rested largely on the fact that the importance of sea power in British strategy remained difficult to ignore even for those inclined to try their hardest to do so.